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ABSTRACT

This paper consists of a critique of a paper by James Cummins which appeared in issue number 1 of the Working Papers on Bilingualism, entitled "A Theoretical Perspective on the Relationship between Bilingualism and Thought." Cummins' paper gives the impression that nearly all of the recent studies exploring the effects of bilingualism upon cognitive development and intellectual growth in children strongly support the view that bilinguals excel in problem solving, concept learning, abstract reasoning and general academic achievement. The present paper criticizes this impression, and by reviewing some of the relevant literature, demonstrates that one cannot necessarily conclude that bilingual children are superior. The goal of the studies in bilingualism is not to prove that bilingual education augments cognitive flexibility but rather to show that a second language can be acquired in primary school without detrimental effects. This paper agrees with Cummins' consideration of both linguistic and nonlinguistic factors for understanding bilingualism, but challenges the view that second language learning necessarily introduces the student to the philosophy, attitudes or feelings associated with that language. It is argued that there are not sufficient data to support the idea that a knowledge of French or English as a second language augments cognitive or verbal skills. (CLK)

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A Theoretical Perspective on the Relationship of Bilingualism and Thought: Revisited

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In the first issue of Working Papers on Bilingualism, James Cummins offered some arguments in support of the popular hypothesis that bilinguals may well be more cognitively flexible than their monolingual counterparts. In his well-written and provocative paper he sought to show that there are primarily non-linguistic but also linguistic phenomena which account for the bilingual's superiority. Although his introduction was promising,I found his basic arguments and review of past research both superficial and misleading. Like so many others who have commented in this area, Cummins grossly oversimplified a highly complex subject about which we still know very little. My remarks which follow are meant less as direct criticism than they are as a note of caution to those who would avoid the innumerable pitfalls in discussions of the relationship between thought and speech.

The most serious problem with Cummins' presentation is that he conveys the impression that nearly all recent studies exploring the effects of bilingualism upon the cognitive development and intellectual growth in children strongly support the view that bilinguals excel in problem solving, concept learning, abstract reasoning, and general academic achievement. Although he cites several studies, he refers again and again to the project conducted by Peal and Lambert in 1962. As additional evidence, he alludes to the results of Leopold's well-known work reported in 1949. Before proceeding to specific points in Cummins's general discussion, I should like to examine the appropriateness of some of the research upon which he so heavily relies.

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Leopold's encyclopedic description of his child's linguistic development remains valuable in that it provides one of many models for linguistically describing spontaneous bilingual speech. His prudently expressed intuitive conclusions rarely figure in current discussions on first and second language acquisition, however, because of the ungeneralizability of his work. Indeed, Leopold never aspired, to my knowledge at least, to provide a theory relating to the problem of bilingualism and thought. His aims were essentially descriptive in nature.

Insofar as Peal and Lambert's study is concerned, Cummins would have done well to read the notes which were subsequently published by Lambert and Peal - Annisfeld which dispelled any premature definitive conclusions. Admittedly, the results of this Montreal study were expressed in rather uncompromising terms. Had Professor Lambert ceased his work in bilingualism at that point, Cummins's conclusions about research findings might be partially justified. The pilot project to which he so often refers, however, was only a beginning. As research expanded, claims about the cognitive or intellectual advantages enjoyed by bilinguals became more prudent, to such a point in fact, that Lambert himself, unless I am seriously mistaken, would be the first to reject unqualified statements about the superiority of bilinguals over monolinguals. The most recent work by Lambert and Tucker, Cassely and Edwards, and Swain and her colleagues is extremely encouraging in that it suggests that the English-speaking child who begins schooling in French does not suffer any intellectual or linguistic retardation as a result of second-language learning. I find it hard to understand how a careful examination of the numerous objective reports on their work which have appeared in the last three years could lead any serious researcher to conclude that bilingual

children are better than monolingual children in cognitive tasks and academic achievement. Unless I have completely misunderstood remarks addressed to me in personal conversations with the above-mentioned researchers, I would say that the present goal of these studies is not to prove that bilingual education augments cognitive flexibility or intellectual capacities, but rather to demonstrate that a valuable tool - the ability to fluently speak a second language - can be readily acquired in the primary schools without detrimental effects.

I entirely agree with Cummins when he states that an analysis of effects of bilingualism upon cognition and thought cannot be made without distinguishing between linguistic and non-linguistic factors. I do not share his belief, however, that by studying another language, one cannot help but simultaneously acquire the general philosophy, feelings, attitudes, needs and so forth of the culture where the second language is spoken. While alluding specifically to Canadian research, Cummins discusses the possible non-linguistic influences of bilingualism with no reference whatsoever to particular language acquisition contexts. He is apparently convinced that English-speaking students completing several years of French instruction in an otherwise English school emerge as either split personalities or as a product of two cultures. If these students, while going from one language to the other, actually do change their general way of viewing things one might, intuitively at least, expect such students to be more receptive to foreign cultures, more tolerant and perhaps more cognitively adept. It would be naive at best to assume that such is the case here in Canada. Young students enrolled in the experimental immersion programs here are continuously surrounded by their English-speaking peers, even though they speak French during school

hours. Furthermore, it seems that nearly all of these students express a preference to continue their education in English-speaking schools, according to comments made in a recent lecture by Professor Lambert at a meeting of the Ontario Psychological Association.

Since very little data have been collected on English children attending all-French schools, one can do little more than speculate. Even in situations where the child is immersed in an entirely French atmosphere, serious arguments could be advanced in support of the notion that the chief cultural differences between English and French Canadians are not likely to be internalized by pre-adolescents attending primary schools, especially in cases where the children return to all-English homes and environments.

Macnamara's argument that languages in themselves are not likely to seriously alter innate cognitive abilities was viewed by Cummins as inadequate since it did not take "non-linguistic" phenomena into account. I do not wish to defend Macnamara's statements on bilingualism and thought in this brief paper. I would simply point out to Mr. Cummins that the comments he criticizes were advanced with particular socio-cultural settings in mind. A long-time researcher in Canadian bilingualism, Macnamara is certainly cognizant of the extent of cultural transfer, or lack of, in programs offering second-language instruction. I submit that when writing his paper Macnamara assumed that his readers were sufficiently aware of the state of the art.

Assuming for the moment that the English child participating in an immersion program in an otherwise English school continues to view his environment as an anglophone, might the frequent switching of linguistic codes not be of some cognitive benefit to him? I do not think so since the language switching task in this case is not at all unlike what mono-

lingual children and adults do every day when going from one register to another; indeed, switching between the surface structures of French and English may be less demanding. The child or adult who learns one or more foreign languages refines the switching mechanism, without doubt. It is not likely, however, that the functionning of this switch mechanism is, in any direct way, related to highly complex cognitive operations.

From a purely linguistic standpoint, there is even less data to support the idea that the knowledge of French or English as a second language, especially when acquired in artificial or formal contexts, augments cognitive or verbal skills in any way. In light of the striking similarity between French and English syntax - at least as these languages are spoken and taught in Canada - along with the probability that the child has added many more new symbols than concepts to his repertoires, the linguistic relativity hypothesis, if it has any validity at all, could certainly not be cited here as support for Cummins's viewpoint.

In conclusion, I should like to apologize to Mr. Cummins for taking up only the negative aspects of his most interesting paper. Had time permitted, I would have preferred to make a more complete analysis of his contribution. He raises numerous thought-provoking questions which must be faced in future research in this area. As an old hand in the game, John B. Carroll would surely say that anyone bold enough to attack questions on the relationship between thought processes and language must be ready to run the gauntlet of criticism from a variety of disciplines, each with a different perspective on the matter. Although we are perhaps no closer to answers than we were in Vygotsky's time, one fact stands out clearly when reading Cummins's paper: such discussions cannot be coherent unless they are confined to highly specific contexts and situations.